

Administration of Joseph R. Biden, Jr., 2023

Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast
February 2, 2023

The President. Well, thank you, Lucy, for that introduction and, I might add, as I said last year, for your courage.

You know, like many of you in the audience, Lucy lost a piece of her soul, and it's—you know, while the pain never fully leaves, you eventually find the purpose to carry on, and that's what you've done. You've done it magnificently. And you're doing it with your service in the Congress, and we're a better nation because you've kept the faith.

And by the way, the reference—the reference to my grandmom was: Every time I'd walk out of my Grandfather Finnegan's house in Scranton, he'd yell, "Joey, keep the faith." And my grandmother would yell: "No, Joey, spread it. Spread it."

You do a heck of a job. My God, you're beautiful, beautiful, beautiful, dear. No, really, you're magnificent.

I also want to thank the other leaders here at the breakfast: Representative Tim Walberg; Senator Kirsten Gillibrand; Mike Rounds—Mike, it's good to see you—we used to sit there together a lot in the past; and former Senator Mark Pryor. And he and his dad and I also spent an awful lot of time together.

And I applaud your work to make a more intimate gathering, bringing back to its roots, but I understand we've got a bunch of folks at a hotel not far from here. How many?

National Prayer Breakfast cochair Representative Timothy L. Walberg. About 1,300.

The President. About 1,300. They apparently are watching this. Welcome. Welcome to all 1,300. And the House invites you to come to the floor today—all 1,300 of you. *[Laughter]* No, I'm teasing. I'm teasing. Sorry. *[Laughter]*

But, I'm grateful you're able to be—join us in prayer this morning and lift up one another and our Nation—and our Nation.

And I want to thank Vice President Harris and Speaker McCarthy and Minority Leader Jeffries.

And I also want to thank Bishop McKenzie.

And, Pastor, I don't know, I'm a little worried how you got this whole choir here. I'm—I tell you what: You—I think you've got a—well, I won't go into that. At any rate—*[laughter]*—but the incredible Brooklyn Tabernacle Singers, I tell you.

St. Augustine—in my church, the Catholic Church—would say that "singing is praying twice." And I can only pray once because I couldn't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow. *[Laughter]*

My father used to—when he was in high school—he didn't go to college, but in his college years, had a band. And he could sing. He played the saxophone. And he could dance. And he used to say to me, "Joey, I don't know where you come from." *[Laughter]* He said: "You have no lip. You can't play a reed instrument, number one. Number two, you have two left feet. Number three, you can't carry a tune in a wheelbarrow. But I still love you." *[Laughter]*

Look, I've attended many prayer breakfasts over the years with the Nation struggling and in strife, and also in times of peace and prosperity. And I'm honored to continue the tradition started by President Eisenhower, I'm told, that—for Presidents to come and speak to the prayer breakfast.

Just before Christmas, I offered a message to the country—a message that is at the heart of the Christian faith, but yet is universal—a universal message of hope, of joy, of love.

Whether you're Christian, whether you're Jewish, Hindu, Muslim, Buddhist, or any other faith, or no faith at all, it speaks to all of us as human beings who are here on this Earth primarily to care for our—one another; look—look out for one another; and to love one another. And it's not always easy. It's hard. But that's our mission.

The message is always important, but especially important during tough times like what we've been through the last 3, 4, 5 years. The pandemic that's taken so much from us, from so many people.

We've lost so much with one another. We lost so many people. Over a million lives lost in America alone. A million lives lost. And they say for every one life lost, there are nine significant people who were—cared greatly about that lost person.

And we've seen record bouts of extreme weather claiming lives and destroying homes all across the country. I've taken more—as the Vice President can tell you—more helicopter rides this last year and half than you can imagine. More timber has burned down in the West, in the Northwest, and even in the Southeast—the Southwest than the entire State of Missouri. There's just enormous damage.

There's violence in our communities, like the mass shooting during the Lunar New Year at Monterey Park and Half Moon Bay.

And Trey Nichols—excuse me, Tyre Nichols and his family and the community in Memphis are—there—justice is long overdue.

Look, in our politics and our lives, we too often see each other as opponents and not competitors. We see each other as enemies, not neighbors. And as tough as these times have been, if we look closer, we see the strength, the determination that has long defined America.

Look, you know, we—as we look to the new year—my friend, Chris Coons, is out there—I see Chris; how you doing, pal?—who went to law school and got a divinity degree at the same time.

And he offers this wisdom. I thought it was really incredible what you said, Chris. You said, "Let's continue the practice of the ministry of presence." The ministry of presence. Being present not just for yourself, but for one another. That's what's expected of those of us in public service, the ministry of presence.

That means being there for one another. But you know, there are those in the greatest need who are looking to us. They've elected us to help them—to really look at each other not as Democrats, not as Republicans, but as who we really are—as fellow Americans, fellow human beings worthy of being treated with dignity and respect.

Because when we're present in our lives, we find there's so much more that unites us, in my view. So much more that unites us than divides us. And while we have profound differences, the last 2 years have proven we can come together to do big things for the country.

We can join hands and get things done. We can redeem the soul of America. And what's the soul of the Nation? Well, the soul is the breath, the life, the essence of who we are. The soul makes us "us."

It's embodied in the sacred proposition that we're all created equally in the image of God. A sacred proposition rooted in the Scripture and enshrined in the Declaration of Independence. A sacred proposition that Dr. King invoked when he told us about his dream for the Nation, a dream I thought about deeply last month when I—would have been Dr. King's 94th birthday.

Senator Warnock—Reverend Warnock—invited me to speak at a Sunday service at Dr. King's Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta. It was deeply humbling. I've been to the church before, but apparently no President has ever spoken and given the sermon. And as I—in a sacred place, it was a time to pray and contemplate Dr. King's moral vision and clear path. He talked about the "Beloved Community" that still inspires us today.

And here's what I learned in my life and career along the path, as many of you have learned along the path that you've taken: We're all imperfect. We're all imperfect beings. We're fallible. We're frail. We fail. We don't know where and what fate will deliver us and when.

But we do know what we can, at our best, do: seek a life a little—a little bit of light and hope, a little bit of love and truth. We know that faith and history teach us however dark the night, "joy cometh in the morning."

And that joy comes when we apply the commandments of Scripture. "Love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, all thy mind, and all thy soul. And "Love thy neighbor as thy self." That's the hardest one I think. At least, it's hardest here. Didn't use to be as hard. I've been here a long time, but it seems to be getting harder. It's easy to say; it's hard to do.

But in that commandment lies the essence of faith. Loving our neighbors is also part of the essence of the American promise, a promise that comes with a new Congress that is more diverse and more different and—more religions, more races, more diversity than ever before in our history: people of all faiths, some people of no faith; gay, straight; immigrant, Native American. Differences that express the infinite creativity of God who is able to see His reflection in countless ways in different people.

It's also an expression of the American conviction that our diversity is one of our greatest strengths. That's why Jill and I have opened the White House to celebrations of faith in our Nation for Easter, for the Jewish High Holidays, for Diwali, and more. That's America. That's who we are.

Let me close with the question Dr. King asked us all those years ago: "Where do we go from here?" Where do we go from here? My message to all of you and to the Nation is: We go forward. We go forward together. Let's be the doers of the Word. Let's keep the faith.

Let's remember who we are. We're the United States of America—the United States of America. We're born out of an idea. No other nation in the world is born of an idea. They're based on ethnicity, geography, and so many other things. But the idea that we hold these truths to be self-evident that all men and women are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, et cetera.

There's nothing beyond our capacity. We have to remember who in God's name we are. We're the United States of America.

My prayer for this prayer breakfast is, we start to see each other again, look at each other again, travel with each other again, argue like hell with each other again, but then still go to lunch together. *[Laughter]*

You know, one of the interesting things when I first got to the Senate—it was in the days when there were some very strong segregationists still in the Senate, from James O. Eastland of Mississippi and, you know, Strom Thurmond. I could go down the list. And I used to

watch Teddy Kennedy and James O. Eastland argue like hell on the floor. Then they'd go to the Senate Dining Room, sit down, and they'd eat together. They'd eat together.

I don't know how we do that anymore, but we have to. We have to start treating each other in ways different than we have, in my humble opinion.

It's been the greatest honor of my life to serve this country. I know I don't look it, but I've done it for a few years. *[Laughter]* And a lot of good folks, not-so-good folks, great folks, and a lot of folks better than me.

Let's just sort of, kind of, join hands again a little bit. Let's start treating each other with respect. That's what Kevin and I are going to do. Not a joke. We had a good meeting yesterday. I think we've got to do it across the board. It doesn't mean we're going to agree, and fight like hell, but let's treat each other with respect.

God bless you all, and may God protect our troops.

NOTE: The President spoke at 8:25 a.m. in the U.S. Capitol Visitor Center. In his remarks, he referred to Rep. Lucia K. McBath, in her capacity as cochair of the National Prayer Breakfast; former Gov. David H. Pryor of Arkansas; Vashti Murphy McKenzie, interim president and general secretary, National Council of Churches, and Jim Cymbala, pastor, Brooklyn Tabernacle in New York City, in their capacity as keynote speakers of the National Prayer Breakfast; and Sen. Christopher A. Coons.

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Locations: Washington, DC.

Names: Biden, Jill T.; Coons, Christopher A.; Cymbala, Jim; Gillibrand, Kristen E.; Harris, Kamala D.; Jeffries, Hakeem S.; McBath, Lucia K.; McCarthy, Kevin O.; McKenzie, Vashti Murphy; Pryor, David H.; Pryor, Mark L.; Rounds, M. Michael; Walberg, Timothy L.; Warnock, Raphael G.

Subjects: Bipartisanship; California, shooting in Monterey Park; California, shootings in Half Moon Bay; COVID-19 pandemic; House minority leader; National Prayer Breakfast; Natural disasters, damage and recovery efforts; Speaker of the House of Representatives; Tennessee, police-involved beating and death in Memphis; Vice President.

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